



Social Media Guidelines for Clergy & Congregational Leaders

The North Georgia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church

Approved by the Cabinet of the North Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church
February 2016

Introduction

Recommendations for Use of Guidelines

These guidelines are intended for use of clergy, church staff members, church volunteers and ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. These guidelines are offered to be included as is – or adapted for context – in staff and volunteer handbooks in the churches and related ministries of the North Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church. All other entities should contact the Connectional Ministries Office of the North Georgia Conference for permission to use the guidelines.

Social Media Defined

Social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to advance interactive communication—both public and private uses—and to include instant messaging, texting, emailing, and video chatting. Because social media is always evolving and changing, this living document will be revisited as necessary.

Responsible Use of Social Media

Creating community—the body of Christ—is the core function of congregations. In all we do, we reflect the love of Christ to and for the world. In the world of social media, this applies to the content of our posting to various social media sites. Clergy and lay staff are held to a high standard of behavior while online. Churches should adopt a social media policy as part of an employee manual. A suggested template has been included in this document. Major points to cover with church staffs include:

- Church staff shall not create a church social media account without the knowledge of the church. This is both for protecting the church and creating a sustainable model for content production.
- Once a church social media account is created, there should always be three people, including at least one staff person and at least one lay person with full administrative rights.
- Staff should understand that personal social media site usage and posting should reflect their status as an employee of a United Methodist congregation. Employees should not only utilize the same judicious wisdom when posting from their work (for example, a preschool teacher not posting pictures of her students on a personal social media account) but should also remember that all social media interaction reflects upon the church which employees them.

Reminders and Who Can Help

No clergy or layperson is authorized to speak on behalf of The United Methodist Church – or even your own local congregation. The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, via the *Book of Discipline*, speaks on behalf of the UMC. If the need should arise to speak to the media, please contact your District Superintendent. If you would like help educating a church staff, volunteers, or your congregation about social media – or would like help crafting your own congregational Social Media Guidelines, please contact the NGUMC Connectional Ministries Office via connect@ngumc.org.

Social Media and the Church

Social media is a useful and necessary means of developing relationships and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The purpose of the following guidelines & practices are to encourage the frequent, intentional, and appropriate use of the various forms of social media.

Top Ten Best Practices of Social Media (For All of Us)

1. When using social media, **observe Wesley's General Rules**:
 - Do no harm
 - Do good
 - Attend to the ordinances of God
2. **Claim, maintain and monitor your congregation's social media profiles and websites.** Take care to keep the online profiles, websites and administrative responsibilities current. Ask yourself: who is/will be responsible for monitoring your congregation's social media profiles and websites?
3. If you are not sure about appropriate use of social media, **ask for help.** If you are not sure about a post, do not post it. Every post, personal or corporate, reflects back on the congregation. Ask yourself: Is this post or information timely? Newsworthy? Ready for the world to see?
4. **Be respectful, collegial, and intentional of other's privacy** including the announcing of prayer concerns and where location services (ie checking in via FourSquare) are concerned. Ask yourself: Is this my news to tell? Do I have permission to share this information?
5. **Be professional and maintain the integrity of the office of clergy, church staff, and church volunteers** through social media. Remember that you are not authorized to speak on behalf of the United Methodist Church – or even your own local congregation.
6. **Protect the safety of congregants, minors, vulnerable adults, and yourself.** Do not share the addresses and locations of congregants and minors via social media. Ask yourself: Could the information I am posting potentially risk the safety of any individual?
7. **Be friendly and fair** - allow others to friend you instead of vice versa.
8. When posting photos, **allow others to identify themselves.** Ensure that no photos of minors are posted without prior written parental consent. Never identify minors in photographs.
9. Take care to **adhere to Safe Sanctuary guidelines**, adapting them to social media practices. Refer to the Safe Sanctuaries section of this document for more information.
10. **Remember your Christian witness** and allow your use of social media to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Best Practices for Clergy

Online presence of clergy

It is recommended that clergy maintain an internet presence by having an active social media profile, a blog, or at minimum a bio and contact information on your church's website. We encourage clergy to take advantage of all the positive benefits of social media while remaining aware of potential areas of concern. We implore clergy to use collegiality and discretion; to be respectful of privacy; and to be safe when using social media. Clergy are encouraged to be open to "friend-ing" members of your congregation - preferably accepting an invitation; rather than initiating a friend request. Use these guidelines for online engagement.

Ask yourself: *What can church members and the community learn about me online?*

Stewardship and Boundaries

While Social Media is a gift, our Wesleyan theology reminds us that even good things must be consumed and used in moderation. When using social media, please remain attentive to the stewardship of your time and the time of others. Always maintain appropriate boundaries with others and take care to watch for the proverbial “slippery slope.”

It is important to use care in your language, as meaning and tone are often lost in translation. Knowing this, it is important that we take the time to carefully craft words, especially when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. If you would hesitate to say something in person, it is best not to say it via social media. Remember the Wesleyan commitment to care for others. When using social media, ask yourself the General Rules: Does this do harm? Does this do good? Does this help others to attend to the ordinances of God? Does this reflect love of God, neighbor and self?

Ask yourself: *What is the purpose of this post?*

Collegiality

With social media, the line between public and private communication is thin, blurry and often non-existent. Just like communicating within the church, it is never a good idea to make disparaging comments about fellow clergy, their ministry or congregants in social media. When it comes to the use of social media, support your colleagues and be respectful of other clergy and other opinions. Once you say something on the Internet it remains accessible forever—even if you delete it. When commenting on current events from social issues to church politics, clergy should strive to maintain their prophetic voice; while, at the same time maintaining the ordained covenant to uphold The United Methodist Church and its social practices, leadership, polity and ministry.

Please be aware that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has very specific guidelines related to political commentary offered by churches and/or clergy. Clergy and church representatives are encouraged to maintain a healthy balance between a prophetic voice and keeping the church’s tax exempt status intact as violations of IRS regulations can result in a revocation of a church's tax exempt status. Refer to www.irs.gov or www.ngumc.org for information.

Ask yourself: *What if this were printed in Sunday’s bulletin?*

Discretion and Confidentiality

Be judicious in your online conduct and speech. Use discretion by refraining from sharing confidential information from meetings or personal interactions with others that could cast The United Methodist Church or any other relationships in a bad light.

Content that is shared over social media networks must be done solely by the individual who will be held accountable for what is shared if confidentiality is broken.

Because of this and other concerns, social media is never an appropriate medium through which to counsel parishioners - even in private messages, text messages and emails. Move counseling conversations to an appropriate venue.

Ask yourself: *Is this the appropriate venue for this conversation?*

Location Sharing

Social Media such as Foursquare, Yelp, Facebook, etc. that allow one to “check in” at one’s current location should be used with discretion. Checking in refers to making one’s location known via a social media outlet. Never check-in (i.e. disclose the location of) anyone who has not expressed their permission to be checked in. Additionally, when posting on Facebook, Twitter, etc., be discreet in tagging persons who are in the same location as you are; rather, use hashtags as a means of facilitating conversation. Remember that when you check-in others, especially ailing parishioners, you may be breaking HIPPA laws and creating other confidentiality issues.

Using social location platforms is a tool to raise awareness about your church's location, including worship and other events. It also serves as an accountability tool for when clergy are not in their office (i.e. holding drop by office hours at local coffee shop).

Ask yourself: *What message does this "check-in" convey?*

Remember that you are a public figure

We sometimes like to wear our "clergy" or "church" hats and then our "average-person-on-the-street" hats. When posting on Facebook, tweeting or updating a blog, it is important to realize that most people do not see that differentiation. You are their pastor or the pastor in the community and they hold you to a higher standard. Make sure that everything you post or share, whether it is words or photos, is worthy of this calling and higher standard. Everything you post is public.

Ask yourself: *Would you like to see this post as a quote attributed to you in the local newspaper or on the television? Would you like your current Facebook profile picture to be used to identify you in a news story or blog post?*

Remember that you are not authorized to speak for The United Methodist Church

To give your opinions, especially on hotly debated topics, can be construed as making a statement on behalf of the church. It is smarter to say nothing at all especially if you are inclined to make a statement contrary to the UMC's policies or theologies which you have taken a vow to uphold. Even with a disclaimer, by virtue of your position in the community, what you say and do does reflect on your church as well as the denomination. If you are contacted by the media regarding a current event topic, please refer to conference media protocols.

Ask yourself: *Am I authorized to speak to the media on this topic?*

Respect Privacy

Please be respectful of your own privacy and the people you serve. Also, help the people you serve be sensitive to the privacy of others. Social Media is an excellent way to share the good moments and the sad moments in our lives, but as leaders, we are called to be especially mindful of how people respond to hearing news in such a non-personal manner. Also, it is not appropriate to share someone else's concerns or joys without their consent. To post a prayer concern without her or his prior permission is a violation of clergy ethics and HIPPA guidelines. Consider adding a box to your prayer concerns card: "Do we have your permission to share this concern on Social Media or via email?"

For more information on HIPPA guidelines, please visit: <http://www.hhs.gov/>

Ask yourself: *Do we have permission to share this prayer request publically?*

Be Accurate

Review content you are posting for factual and grammatical errors. You may consider using Google, local and national news websites, and Snopes.com to check "news" before you share it with others.

Ask yourself: *Am I absolutely sure this is true?*

Be Safe

Be careful when posting or following links that are shared with you while on Facebook, Twitter or that come through email that lead you to external websites. These are often phishing ploys to get information about you or your friends. Protect yourself and your friends by being careful about what you click on or post on a wall.

Ask yourself: *Am I absolutely sure this is legitimate?*

Be “Friend”ly

Remember, clergy are encouraged to be open to “friend-ing” members of their congregation - preferably accepting an invitation; rather than initiating a friend request. Once you start “friending” church members, you have to be willing to friend them all. In this case, you do not get to pick your friends. It would be advisable to make an open invitation for your congregation to friend you on Facebook instead of hand selecting members of your congregation or organization, in the case of extension ministries, as “friends”. This applies across all social media platforms.

Ask yourself: *Am I going to accept friend requests from members of my congregation?*

Leaving Well

United Methodist clergy serve among a people for a season and, eventually, will move on to another place of ministry. We agree to go where we are sent as well as “leave when we leave.”

Our covenant of ordination holds us to a high standard to be in ministry with our current congregation while allowing people who follow after us to be fully present and pastor to their congregations and community. With the advent of social media, this has become more difficult, but there are a several ways to achieve this. We will highlight two.

One way to live into this is to delete and unfollow all the church and community friends on your social media accounts. This means they are not part of your social media life anymore and you change churches without any further attachments. Be aware that feelings may be hurt, but it is the cleanest break. This also best reflects the expectations of itinerating clergy. It is expected that you do this for everyone, not deleting almost everyone and then keeping tabs on a few.

A second option is to look at the fine grain options social media networks offer for privacy. For example, with Facebook you can assign privacy restrictions and hide former parishioners from your timeline. They can still contact you but they aren’t a part of your day-to-day life.

You will also want to remove yourself from any Facebook groups that have been created for your church as well as removing any content creation/ administration rights you have to your church’s Facebook page.

You will want to practice the same responsible leadership for other social media sites, following the appropriate tools for that platform. For example, you will want to unfollow your former parishioners and delete any lists related to your prior congregation for Twitter. Also, have the church change the password for the congregation’s Twitter account, if one exists. The same applies to followers and boards for Pinterest and the metaphors used for connecting and groups in various social media sites, as well as password administration.

Ask yourself: *Do my online interactions reflect my current ministry setting?*

Always “Tweet sweet”

How we say things matters as much as what we say. In the world of Social Media, what is intended as playful might be read as flippant. Direct, brief wording can come across as dismissive, arrogant, or mean. If we are to be winsome in our demeanor so as to hope people see the love of Christ in us, that axiom goes for social media as well as face-to-face interaction. We have a responsibility to honoring our First General Rule, “do no harm”. This is especially important in the world of social media.

Ask yourself: *How might this post be interpreted?*

Best Practices for Congregations

Create and maintain a website and social media accounts for your church

It is strongly recommended that every church have an intentional presence on the internet by maintaining a website and social media pages. In many ways your church's internet presence is the new front door to your congregation and is likely the first place potential visitors and community members will turn for information about service times, location, and what they might expect if they attend. Make sure that you share the church's physical address, telephone number, and worship times prominently (and accurately) on your website and on social media.

Once you create a website or social media profile, update it regularly. An old or outdated page is worse than not having a page at all.

Monitor your social media profiles regularly. Social media is considered by many as a means of contact and communication. For example: If you have Facebook page and never check it, someone who has contacted you there may interpret your inattentiveness to your page as if you are choosing not to respond to them. This is much like having voicemail on your phone but never checking the messages. Never share personal information about members or post photos of members or guests on their website or on social media without their permission.

Encourage and remind congregants that posting pictures of clergy and church staff is also to be done with permission - especially pictures obtained outside of worship and public events.

Ask yourself: *Is this social media presence sustainable?*

Promote events, share information, and facilitate discussion

Creating accounts on major social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is a great way to share information with people about upcoming events at your church. It is also a great way to invite people—both congregants and the community.

Be careful not to reveal personal information about church members or visitors, especially prayer concerns or photos, without their permission. Consider adding a box to your prayer concerns card: "Do we have your permission to share this concern on Social Media or via email?"

Leave it up to church members to add photos of their own children if they want them included on the page or associated with the event.

The use of hashtags is a great way to facilitate conversation and connection. You can do this by adding a hashtag at the end of a tweet or Facebook post like this: #NGAC16 - meaning, North Georgia Annual Conference 2016.

Hashtags allow people to choose whether or not they would like to participate in a conversation or reveal their involvement in an event or subject matter. Hashtags can be searched and allow users to see what others are saying about a topic, person, event, etc.

Note: Hashtags can be publically searched and viewed by anyone who chooses to engage the conversation.

Social location applications create entries for every public place, including churches. Make every effort you can to "claim" and customize your church's entry on each platform to ensure it reflects your congregation. Examples of websites that do this include Google's maps.google.com, Facebook.com, foursquare.com, loopt.com, yelp.com, and others.

Ask yourself: *Do we have permission to share this picture or information?*

Safe Sanctuaries: Social Media, Technology and the Internet

Under the auspices of the 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 United Methodist Books of Discipline, all United Methodist local churches are charged to create and employ church policies and procedures for the protection of children (birth -11 years), youth (twelve -18 years) and vulnerable adults (18+ years old with any mental, physical, situational or age-related condition that renders them vulnerable to the decisions and care of others). These Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures are meant to reduce the risk of abuse to such persons within the community and the Church. Given the increased use of technology and social media in the life of the church and its individual members, churches and conferences have a responsibility to define social media policies that uphold the covenant to create Safe Sanctuaries for children, youth and vulnerable adults. To this end, the churches and pastors of the North Georgia Conference affirm the following:

We will utilize technology, the Internet and all social media tools to promote Christian community and the building up of authentic relationships.

- Facebook is a wonderful tool to use in Preschool, Children's and Youth Ministry. It is highly recommended that ministry groups establish their own "page" in order to communicate with group members, as well as their parents/legal guardians.
- Blogs allow adults and youth alike a place to express ideas, thoughts and opinions, and to allow others the opportunity to engage them through response.
- Youtube and other video websites have proved useful for sharing video clips from any number of church-related events, sharing original video produced to promote an upcoming event or idea, or sharing video produced by another individual or group that might be used by your ministry for conversation, worship, or reflection.
- Texting and Tweeting have proven effective means of communication for getting a message out quickly to one individual or to an entire group.

We will protect the privacy and identity of all persons under 18 years of age and all vulnerable adults in online writings, postings and discussions.

- Adult employees and staff must not post photos or video that identify children, youth or vulnerable adults on any online site or printed publication without written consent from a parent or legal guardian.
- All Facebook groups and pages associated with Preschools, Children's or Youth Ministry areas will be designated as "closed" groups, requiring all those who wish to gain access to be approved by the page administrators.
- All church-related Facebook groups and pages must have at least two administrators. If an administrator is no longer associated with the ministry, that individual's administrative status must be revoked.
- Photos of minors may only be published or posted after a photo release has been signed by their parent/guardian. Photos used in other mediums, such as church newsletters, websites, blogs, twitpics, etc., must not include any identifying information of minors.

- Photos may only be posted to the Facebook page by page administrators. Adults (staff, volunteers, parents, etc.) should not identify minors in photographs posted online or in print. Individuals (including minors) are welcome to identify (i.e. “tag”) themselves.
- When checking in on Foursquare, Facebook, or any location tagging social media, only “check in” yourself. Never check in minors. Be sensitive to tagging or revealing other participants’ location without their expressed permission. Rather, create a hashtag to facilitate conversation. (See the Best Practices section of this document for more information on the use of hashtags.)
- In the case of clergy and parishioner online connections, Friend Requests, Follow Requests, Circle Requests, etc. should be initiated by the parishioner, especially if the parishioner is a minor or vulnerable adult.

We will maintain appropriate relational boundaries with minors.

- No adult shall initiate Facebook contact with or “friend” a minor or vulnerable adult. An adult accepting the “friend” requests of minors is up to the discretion of the adult in charge of the ministry area, in consultation with the pastor. Regardless of the decision that is reached, this practice should be uniformly practiced by all adult staff and volunteers. Any conversations with minors or vulnerable adults shall occur in open channels.
- When emailing, texting, tweeting, or Facebook messaging a minor, adults should copy another adult (ideally a parent or guardian) on the message, or post it in a public venue (i.e. a Facebook wall as opposed to a private message). This will allow adults to maintain the “two adults present” Safe Sanctuaries standard when using social media.
- Social media, even though it offers convenient and private channels, is not an appropriate medium for counseling - especially with minors. Begin or transition a pastoral conversation into an approved Safe Sanctuary model (i.e. office with windows, two adult rule abiding settings, etc.).

We shall not engage in the creation, viewing or distribution of pornography.

- Engaging in the above stated behavior is a violation of civil laws and clergy ethics and can lead to incarceration and the revocation of clergy credentials.

We shall not engage in, encourage or condone cyberbullying.

- Every children’s ministry and youth ministry group, and adult volunteer training sessions should include in its teaching and ministry Code of Conduct a session on the types and consequences of cyber-bullying, including how to identify it and how to report it. To learn more about cyberbullying, visit: <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org> or various other websites.

We shall educate young people in the effective ways of using social media and technology to live out their Christian witness in what they write, post, share, and view.

- We all must understand, and teach to minors and vulnerable adults, that once something is posted on web, sent via email or sent via text, it is impossible to fully recover or erase it. There should be no expectation of privacy or reasonable expectation that the information stops with the person for whom it was intended.
- A good rule of thumb: If you do not want it posted on the church sign, website, or bulletin, do not text it or post it via social media.

SAMPLE
Local Church Social Media Policy

Social media is increasingly becoming a venue for communication, discussion and community. We believe it is in the best interest of [this church] to be aware of and participate in the positive benefits of social media while being aware of potential areas of concern. The following guidelines aim to provide you helpful, practical advice--and also to protect both you and [this church].

Guidelines:

- All employees are personally responsible for the content that they publish online. Be mindful that what you publish on a social media network, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Pinterest, may be viewed not only by the intended recipient but may be shared by that recipient or may be inadvertently viewed by others. Consider all content you post as if it were public.
- Your online behavior should reflect the same, if not greater, standards of honesty, respect and consideration than you use face to face.
- Remember your association and responsibility with [this church] in online social environments. Whether or not you identify yourself as a [this church] employee, ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you wish to present yourself with colleagues, church members, and the community.
- Concerns that you may have with church policies should not be aired publicly on social networking sites. Refrain from any online postings that are derogatory toward [this church], other employees, members, guests or others.
- When contributing online, never post confidential information pertaining to a church member, visitor, or anyone being served by a ministry of this church.
- When uploading digital photos to your social media sites, be sure that you do not post photos of others without their express approval.
- Do not provide any personal counseling over social media. Instead move discussions to an appropriate venue.
- Be accurate. Review the content of your posts for factual and grammatical errors.
- If you would like to create a social media group or profile for a specific ministry, you must first get approval by [senior pastor/communications committee/communications director]. We ask that at minimum of one church staff member and one lay member be made administrators of any social media profile created.
- Any violations of the aforementioned social networking policy may result in disciplinary action, including, but not limited to, termination of employment from [this church].

Adapted from guidelines of Decatur First United Methodist Church and Young Harris College

SAMPLE
United Methodist Preschool and Kindergarten
Social Media Policy

The following guidelines apply to all social networking media, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Wiki, personal web pages, and blogs for all employees of this Preschool and Kindergarten and Weekday Children's Ministries.

Guidelines:

- All employees are personally responsible for the content that they publish online. Be mindful that what you publish on a social media network, such as Facebook or Twitter, may be viewed not only by the intended recipient but any and all individuals who have access to that individual's account.
- Your online behavior should reflect the same, if not greater, standards of honesty, respect and consideration than you use face to face.
- Remember your association and responsibility with [your organization] in online social environments. Whether or not you identify yourself as a [your organization] employee, ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you wish to present yourself with colleagues, parents and students.
- Concerns that you may have with church policies should not be aired publicly on social networking sites.
- No last names, school names, addresses or phone numbers should appear in online postings.
- When contributing online, never post confidential student information.
- When uploading digital photos to your social media sites, be sure that you do not post photos of your students and do not post photos of other staff members without their express approval.
- Remember that [your organization] is a church-based preschool. Any online postings that are derogatory toward [your organization and your church] employees, families and / or students reflect negatively on [your organization]. In short, use common sense and common decency when contributing comments on social networking sites.
- There will be no texting, emailing, or use of social media during preschool hours or during any school related workshop or staff meetings. In extenuating circumstances, texting and / or emailing is permissible, as long as the employee informs the Preschool and Kindergarten Director, preferably at the start of the day if possible, that such an emergency exists.
- Any violations of the aforementioned social networking policy may result in disciplinary action, including, but not limited to, termination of employment from [your organization].

Adapted from guidelines of Decatur First United Methodist Church Preschool